

Emerson in the Star Garden: Writing and the Sensuous World

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The greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another.

William James

What right have you to take the word “wealth” which originally meant “well-being” and degrade and narrow it by confining it to certain sorts of material objects measured by money.

John Ruskin

For as long as I can remember, I have appreciated, to the point of longing for it, a particular quality of time I think of as languidness. Related to music, it would be a slow tempo, adagio maybe, or even lento itself. In writing “Emerson in the Star Garden”, my objective — my desire — was to explore the nature of this appreciation, especially in its relationship to nature itself, as found not only in the country, but also in urban settings, in this case Lisbon’s “Jardim da Estrela”. In a sense, the writing was a meditative ode to the park, both the park as an “objective” Lisbon environment and as “subjective” terrain, the terrain of my personal history, dating back to my first year in Lisbon, in the mid-90s, roughly twenty years ago.

In my subjective world, the park represents, as parks do for many, a state or states of well-being, not in the sense of my having experienced these more during my first year in Lisbon than now — in fact, the contrary — but in the sense of it serving as a sanctuary in my memory and imagination, one that I find valuable to return to. As a sanctuary, it allows for an uninhibited flow of thoughts that can be charted and travelled through freely; it is both a peaceful and a creative mental space.

The following text is partly an exploration of the nature and qualities of this subjective space, a place where time is experienced as slow and well-being is cultivated. More explicitly it aims to offer a psychotherapeutic perspective on this inner landscape, derived from my practice as a psychotherapist and from Eastern sources of therapy/thinking, including mindfulness as related to the environment. My essay will draw on the work of the Hungarian-American scientist and writer Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who has investigated and written about states of optimal experience; on the writer Eva Hoffman's work on time and memory and the travel writer and essayist Pico Iyer's writing about time and movement. This essay also aims to focus on the writing process itself and how writing about the past — collecting and connecting parts and pieces of one's past self using words as tools — handling them — can be therapeutic.

1. Nature and Interconnectedness

"Emerson in the Star Garden" began with a 2015 conference at the University of Lisbon entitled "Naturally Emerson". According to Ralph Waldo Emerson's biographer Robert Richardson, one of the writer and theologian's life altering insights took place in a park: Paris' "Jardin des Plantes". The year was 1833, just three years prior to the publishing of his most well-known text, "Nature" (1836),¹ when he made his first trip to Europe. "Emerson", writes Richardson, "was moved by the organization of plants according to Jussieu's system of classification and the way all such objects were related and connected" (Richardson 143). His belief in the interconnectedness of all things was fundamental to his spiritual transcendentalism, as when in "Nature" he writes the much quoted phrase: "standing on the bare ground, my head bathed in the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space — all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part and particle of God".¹

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson. "Nature." 1836. *Emerson Central*. <http://www.emersoncentral.com/texts.htm>. Last accessed: August 2, 2016.

These words of Emerson's bear echoes of the Swedish philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), whose philosophy had a significant influence on the American writer. Emerson admired Swedenborg's ability to marry mysticism with science. He saw Swedenborg as a "metaphysical scientist", through his attempt to unify the realm of spirit with the expanding world of material science, viewing the two as interdependent and intertwined. It is interesting to note that when Emerson was in Paris' "Jardin des Plantes" in 1833, struck by Jussieu's scientific classifications, pondering their relationship to the spiritual, the word "scientist" was itself just being coined by the English polymath William Whewell. It is also interesting to witness the current twenty-first-century controversy surrounding such thinkers as Rupert Sheldrake and Graham Hancock, who posit that consciousness is nonlocal (a concept akin to Jung's collective unconscious), and whose questioning of the relationship between the brain and mind is frequently discredited as "pseudoscience". Their focus on spirit chimes in many ways with Swedenborg and Emerson's mysticism.

Hermann Hesse (1877-1962), another northern European thinker who, like Swedenborg, was influenced by eastern mysticism, had a similar belief in the interconnectedness of all things. As an adolescent searching for meaning, I became fascinated with his books and several years ago came across a passage I had particularly liked and had copied down in a notebook. I began my essay with this passage taken from Hesse's short novel *Journey to the East* (1932): "My happiness did indeed arise from the same happiness as the happiness in dreams; it arose from the freedom to experience everything imaginable simultaneously, to express inward and outward easily, to move time and space about like scenes in a theatre" (Hesse 28). The happiness Hesse describes is similar to Emerson's circulating currents of Universal Being, articulated, in particular, in his essay "Circles" in that it arises from a state of free movement or flow. It is this state of being that Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi relates to states of happiness and optimal well-being.

In *Flow* (1992), Csikszentmihalyi proposes that optimal experience is achieved by the ability to control what happens in consciousness, moment by moment, in other words, that "the control of consciousness determines the quality of experience" (30). His words reformulate the statement by William James, quoted at the beginning of this essay, that

“the greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another”.²

Csikszentmihalyi describes intentions as the force that keeps information in consciousness ordered. Functioning as “attentional” structures, they focus us. When we become absorbed by them, we forget ourselves, entering the state of well-being that he calls flow (his choice of the word stems from people he interviewed in the 1970s, using the metaphor of water carrying them along when describing their experiences; they felt taken by an external force synchronicous with their attentive focusing). As he states,

When one is in the flow state, he or she is completely engrossed with the one task at hand and, without making the conscious decision to do so, loses awareness of all other things: time, people, distractions and even basic bodily needs. This occurs because all the attention of the person in the flow state is on the task at hand; there is no more attention to be allocated. (*Optimal Experience* 19)

It is the stimulating movement of this flow that I associate with the slow movement of walking or wandering in nature and to strolling through a park. With the only task at hand a sustained openness to the surrounding environment of the park, and to moving through it, external pressures are absent and internal ones, or stresses, including those of excessive thinking and self-consciousness, exert less influence. Pressurized thinking is replaced by the sensory input of the moment: the smells of flowers and other vegetation, of the earth when wet, on qualities of light, on the feel of the air, on surrounding sounds. Nature is not an agent that intrudes upon the mind in the sense of actively or consciously influencing it (or, as Emerson writes in “Nature”, “nature never wears a mean appearance”³ and as it is a domain without language and the thought processes that accompany it, the outdoors provides a context for a type of connection and focus that is

² William James. “The Varieties of Religious Experience.” 1902. 2016Xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/WJAMES/cover.html. Last accessed: September 26, 2016.

³ Ralph Waldo Emerson. “Nature.” 1836. *Emerson Central*. <http://www.emersoncentral.com/texts.htm>. Last accessed: August 2, 2016.

freer than other environments. It was direct experience with nature that Emerson expounded, writing of the importance of going out into solitude, leaving both one's home and society behind. This connection with nature he considered "daily food" — a spiritual connection he described in "Nature" as "intercourse with heaven and earth".⁴

But how exactly to define and explain nature as it is found specifically in a park? In contemporary environmentalism and ecology, the concept of nature itself is being questioned on various fronts. With the genetic modification of plants, for example, doubts arise as to what extent a given plant is to be considered natural. Other interrogations are formulated about the difference between wild nature and wilderness. These distinctions are articulated with particular refinement by the poet and thinker Gary Snyder in his essay "The Etiquette of Freedom", which describes wild nature as being something that can be found almost anywhere, in cities, for instance, and in parks. It is everywhere, including within our bodies.

However, the most incisive question concerns the relationship between culture and nature, which is evolving from a binary opposition towards a more fluid and complex concept. Our present day, Western concept of nature has been founded on Greek dualism: people and the rest, and within this dualism nature has been considered an external space and something to control. From Newton's divine order through to Descartes' systematic method, nature has been considered separate from that which is human; indeed, there has been a hyperseparation between the two. But culture cannot always be separated from nature: take into consideration the "Jardim da Estrela": there is a café and a gazebo in the park, concerts and craft fairs that are an integral part of it, too. Boundaries blur. Contemporary notions of culture, such as those espoused by such thinkers as Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, relate culture to the mundane — to quotidian ways of life as well as to forms of signification, such as films and media, that circulate within a society. In *Culture and Society* (1961), Williams writes, for instance, that "culture is ordinary, in every society and in every mind" (93). With such conceptualizations, we can understand culture as being thoroughly present in a park.

⁴ Ibid.

Indeed, in contemporary articulations of nature, human beings are no longer viewed as being separate from their environments, but interdependent. In *The Natural Alien* (1985), the environmentalist Neil Evernden, whose views on the nonlocal have affinities with those of the previously mentioned Sheldrake and Hancock, conceptualizes individuals as fields extending beyond the sharp boundaries of our/their bodies and minds and intertwined with the external sensuous world. As he proposes, “if we were to regard ourselves as ‘fields of care’ rather than as discrete objects in a natural environment, our understanding of our relationship to the world might be fundamentally changed” (47). Similarly, David Abrams in *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1997) writes of this intermingling of the human and the non-human. From his perspective, the non-human has its own multiple intelligences which are deeply connected and consanguineous with the human, as when he writes that:

The cycling of the human back into the larger world ensures that the other forms of experience that we encounter — whether ants, or willow trees, or clouds — are never really alien to ourselves. Despite the obvious difference in shape and ability, and style of being, they remain at least distantly familiar, even familial. It is, paradoxically, this perceived kinship or consanguinity that renders the difference, or otherness, so eerily potent. (7)

It was within this framework of nature (again, Emerson’s mindset, as he refers in “Nature” to an “occult relation between man and vegetable”⁵, and specifically the Estrela Park in Lisbon, as a sensuous world of interconnectedness, that my writing was situated. Not only did I think of the park as an interconnected environment of humans and nature, in which all life shares sap or blood, but as a site multilayered in time and generations, with the past existing virtually simultaneously, tangentially and even palpably, alongside the present. I perceived time as multi-dimensional, possessing depth usually associated with the visual, rather than linear. In a park, people of all ages coexist: babies in strollers, young couples arm in arm, the elderly with canes. And from all walks of life. Moreover, within the microcosm of

⁵ Ibid.

a park, multiple generations of people, engaged in the same languorous movements, can be easily evoked by the imagination, bringing multiple pasts into the present. And in a park being itself of the essence — BEING, rather than being in transit, being rather than doing. A park more than almost anywhere else, apart from in the wilderness, lends itself to timeless, eternal, existential states. It invites wandering, both physical and mental, and the mental wandering can lead a person through pathways of memory.

In this way, parks lend themselves to contemplation — to allowing memory and the imagination to travel freely. It is when the external environment is non-invasive, unintrusive and slow, that subjective spaces can flourish; a sense of internal expansiveness is fostered and develops through the removal of external pressures. Going further, when internal pressures are also removed — excessive figuring out, judging, calculating and determining — excessive thinking — there is more opportunity to be mindful and consciously choose, as William James proposed, one thought over another: there is more internal silence.

2. Acceleration and Technology: The Non-Sensual World

Back in the mid-1900s, the exceptionally declarative Gertrude Stein stated “the twentieth century is movement” (153). Hers was a world in the wake of industrialization. Earlier on, Walt Whitman had written in *Democratic Vistas* (1871) about the excesses of industrialization, just as nowadays others are writing about the excesses of technology, including those of acceleration. With technology: the internet, texting, Instagram, apps, online banking, booking and buying, communication is virtually instantaneous. Through computers and smart phones, we ceaselessly receive swiftly moving information that travels at constantly accelerating speeds. We are behooved to actively engage in the blocking or damming of incoming barrages or onslaughts of disembodied data in order not to be submerged. In the past couple of years, the word “overwhelm” has expanded beyond its borders as a verb and taken on the weight of a noun describing a condition.

What becomes of our subjective spaces when they are incessantly imposed upon — invaded? They need to be actively cared for — weeded and pruned — in order for certain types of thinking, creative, free-flowing, for example, to be cultivated, like carefully chosen plants. Inner silence

— the peace that lies between thoughts and the foundation for certain varieties of thinking that silence enables — becomes more difficult to achieve. Just as in an oak wood there may be more than 1000 species, there are within us, as Walt Whitman so famously put it, “multitudes”; yet, how to access them — how to access memories, for instance, amidst incoming interruptions? If the terrain of memory is everything that has existed prior to the present, what opportunities exist to travel through it amidst an excess of disorienting incoming data? As Milan Kundera wrote in his novella *Slowness* (1995), “When things happen too fast, nobody can be certain about anything, about anything at all, not even about himself” (qtd. in Honoré 8). The self, in fact, becomes fragmented. Health problems, such as attention-deficit disorder, can be one result, as can identity-related confusion, not to mention stress itself

In *The Art of Stillness* (2014), Pico Iyer refers to research in the new field of interruption science which has concluded that it takes an average of twenty-five minutes to recover from a phone call, with such interruptions typically occurring every eleven minutes. This means, as he writes:

We’re never caught up with our lives. And the more facts come streaming in on us, the less time we have to process any of them. The one thing technology doesn’t provide us with is the sense of how to make the best use of technology. Put another way, the ability to gather information, which used to be so crucial, is now far less important than the ability to sift through it. (41)

Or, as Eva Hoffmann puts it in her book *Time* (2011), “In the long run, if we do not give ourselves time to process our experiences, and allow immediate perceptions to settle into memories, the brain — so some researchers speculate — may actually become more dispersed and ‘superficial’ in its mappings, losing some of its deeper connectivity and experience-shaping powers” (80). She refers to attention deficit-disorder, an increasingly common health condition mentioned earlier, whose symptoms, or causes, she writes,

Have to do, essentially, with the decrease of tolerance for sustained units of time. ...Computer time, which is increasingly the medium in which we live, functions in nanoseconds

and is making hitherto unimaginable speeds concrete. It is habituating us to ever faster and shorter units of thought and perception, and to focus on the immediate present. (12)

It was as a reaction to excessive acceleration, and specifically to the opening of a fast food restaurant in Italy (the opening of a McDonald's in Piazza di Spagna in Rome), that what is called the "Slow Movement" developed in Italy in the 1980s. The movement was founded on the belief that every living being, event, process or object has its own inherent time or pace, its own "tempo giusto". Eating and drinking, for instance, are best done slowly; similarly, building relationships, gardening, and creative thinking. Other activities are suited to speed: airline travel, sports, using the internet. The "Slow Movement" encourages consciousness around time and an awareness of dimensions of time beyond the linear and chronological. One such dimension is that which the ancient Greeks called *Kairos* — a concept of time that is qualitative rather than quantitative and sequential. It is time in which moments are of an indefinite duration, in which everything can happen, a time of fullness. Similarly, the Japanese have the concept of *ichi-go ichi-e*, which means "one time, one meeting" and expresses a cherishing of time and of treasured meetings. Both share a belief in time mattering almost in the sense of it having matter, or substance, however ephemeral, itself.

3. Taking Time to Process Experience: Engaging in the Sensual World

In writing "Emerson in the Star Garden", I wanted to explore the pleasure of inhabiting, of dwelling in time — the qualitative time of *kairos* and *ichi-go ichi-e*. My desire was for spacious time more than for space itself. Big places have never mattered to me as much as long, slowly unwinding DNA-laden spirally tissues of inner time; that is to say, time as encoded in memory, spanning one's lifetime, and even those of previous generations, at least one's knowledge or experience of them. This is what Eva Hoffman writes of when she describes experiential time during which we can process the flux of life and enjoy the experience of plenitude. She describes it as being accompanied by "qualia", the name scientists give to individual instances of subjective, conscious experience, its qualities and textures. As she writes,

Each moment within ourselves is sensually and affectively constructed. But if we are not to be creatures of the moment, driven — or riven — by impulses we don't understand, we also need to make sense of the psychic flux, and to make links between our felt past and lived present; and this cannot be accomplished without the more over-arching processes of introspection, self-examination and reflection. Above all, the construction of the more extended time within us happens through the unpredictable, often digressive, sometimes involuntary, processes of affective memory. (It was the taste of a small cake that brought back to Proust the sensuously detailed expanses of the past, and gave him his great opus. No wonder he was a great believer in involuntary memory. (105)

She describes it further as “a predisposition to value purely personal and intimate experience, and to savour the textures of that experience; a predilection for a kind of pensiveness, for musing on small things, and reflecting on larger ones. In other words, a predilection for taking one's time about the flow of living” (3-4).

Certain slow-moving activities lend themselves to the experience of inner, subjective experience that Hoffman describes, among them, strolling, meditating and engaging in creative work, such as painting and other forms of art, crafts and various forms of manual work that focus the body and allow the mind free movement. These include activities like boat building, mechanics, knitting and gardening, when the hands are engaged in repetitive movements. The poet and singer Leonard Cohen describes the engagement that comes with connecting with one's inner world, in his case through meditation, not as empty and austere, as we often imagine meditating to be, but as “luxurious and sumptuous ... real, profound and voluptuous and delicious entertainment. The real feast that is available within this activity” (qtd. in Iyer 3).

4. Autobiographical Creative Writing

In looking at the subject of taking the time to process experiences, I would like to focus specifically now on how this takes place within the practice of autobiographical creative writing. Amidst the myriad ways to process

experiences, ranging from thinking to verbal articulation, including conversation and psychotherapy, to the creation of art, writing is one means. In the following section, I will examine the particular ways in which it raises awareness of past experiences and transforms them, resulting, potentially, in a “coming to terms with”, or a “state of grace or peace”. In relation to “Emerson in the Star Garden”, I will do this through examining my own experience of writing in and about the Estrela Park.

As stated earlier, I lived in the neighbourhood of the “Jardim da Estrela” during a six-month period in the mid-1990s. Twenty years later, in 2015, I wrote a piece of creative non-fiction inspired in part by my experiences there and in part by the reframing of them in response to the University of Lisbon’s *Naturally Emerson* conference. The inspiration came not from the six-month period, a time that was more exceptional than others in my life, but from my identifying positive elements specific to that period and revisiting them through writing. Some of the positive elements were related to the experience of being in the park and others to features of my life itself, past and present. The *Naturally Emerson* conference provided a frame for my experience in that it reconnected me with Emerson, whom I had felt an affinity with when I had first encountered him, decades ago, through an unused pile of textbooks in a high school English classroom. I still have the copy of *Polarized Man* (1973), given to me by my teacher and with an Emerson quote I had liked highlighted with a pencil: “Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind” (“Self-Reliance”⁶).

From January 1994 until July of the same year my mornings were largely free as the teaching I was doing at the time normally began during or after the lunch hour. I developed a routine of walking to the park and settling myself in the café adjacent to one of its small ponds to write for a couple of hours. I usually took just a notebook and pen but sometimes a book as well or something else to read. When the weather was pleasant, as it often was, I would sit outside and nurse a milky coffee in sight of the ducks whose movements and beauty captured my attention. I was taken

⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson. “Self-Reliance.” 1841. *Emerson Central*. <http://www.emersoncentral.com/texts.htm>. Last accessed: August 2, 2016.

by the emerald shine of the mallards and mesmerised by the precise way in which they sliced through the water as they left the edge of the pond. I found it curious, too, the way the males darted after the dull coloured females and sometimes tried to push their heads under water as part of their mating rituals. Gradually, I would divert my thoughts from this external world and enter my own subjective world via my notebook and pen. I cannot remember what I wrote back then, but I know that it was a way of revisiting recent experiences and processing them more than about more distant past experiences or developing stories. I was in a city that was new to me, building new relationships, learning a new language and settling in: there were a great many new elements entering my life within a very short span of time. At the end of the two hours, I would be in a more fortified, uplifted state of mind than the one I had been in when I had arrived, thanks to taking the time to look inwards, reflect and attempt to understand.

The writing I did then was largely loose, spontaneous and unformed. I remember someone I had spoken with before my travels to Portugal advising me to “wear my trip like a loose garment”, a phrase I had liked, and in a sense my writing in the park was that way too: I was not trying to cut and hem it into shape. It was the writing Julia Cameron named “morning pages” in her influential book *The Artist’s Way* (1992), a book I had not read at the time but that I felt an affinity with when introduced to it later. Similarly, when new to Portugal and introduced to the writing of Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935), I felt an affinity with the intensely personal, unformed fragments of his *Book of Disquiet* (1982). But twenty years on, when I wrote “Emerson in the Star Garden”, my writing needs and processes were different: I DID want to cut, adjust and re-sew. Forming what I wrote mattered to me.

The act of forming, and structuring content was, and continues to be, important because of its transformational qualities, which I believe are also empowering ones. While loose free writing, of the kind I did twenty years ago — so called morning pages writing — possesses these characteristics, too, they are strengthened by the act of actively forming the content, by the skill involved in crafting it. Looking closely at the act of giving form to content, when the content is autobiographical, is like gazing at the complexity of any system, even like gazing at the ducks in the pond

as I used to do. But if I were to try to put it simply, as though looking through an ordinary magnifying glass, it would be something like this: within an uninterrupted space of non-rushed time, past experiences are given room to be consciously brought into the present moment and transcribed. During the writing process, associations related to the past experience surface and become part of the written text. The process of writing becomes one of consciously bringing forth the known and at the same time of allowing spontaneous memories and thoughts to arise and enter the text. The conscious mind examines this material and brings present moment perspectives to bear on the content. These present perspectives provide “new light” and serve as a transformative element, combined with the skill of using language to articulate and form them. As the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire wrote of self-expression, “to say a true word — which is praxis — is to transform the world” (68). On the minute level of a written text, praxis also takes place and the experience of creating this truth, however “insubstantial”, however “purely subjective”, is empowering in that it brings energy to the moment — the energy of creation.

In his book *Writing as a Way of Being* (2011), the academic writer Robert P. Yagelski describes his own writing process in a way that is similar to what I have described above, referring particularly to the sense of interconnected timelessness it engenders. Part of the creative energy I have referred to is this: the energy created through the act of travelling back in time and memory and making connections between the past and the present. As Yagelski puts it:

As I write, I am — but not because of the writing; rather, the writing intensifies my awareness of myself, my sense of being, which is prior to but, right now, coterminous with this act of writing. And if I attend to my awareness—if I become aware of that awareness, as it were; if I focus my attention on my attention during this act of writing, as I am doing right now—it is not my sense of self as a separate, thinking being that is intensified but my sense of self as existing in this moment and at the same time “inhabiting” the physical place where I am sitting as well as the scene in the coffee shop that I am imagining and trying to describe, a scene removed from me

in time and space at this moment; thus, I am connected to this moment and those other moments I have been trying to describe. (104)

5. Conclusion

Reading Yagelski's words I am taken back to Emerson's "transparent eyeball" of "Universal Being", to the mysticism of Hesse and to Csikszentmihalyi's states of flow and optimal well-being. All of these take place within the context of slow or languid time, absent of distractions. When time is languid it allows for the "weapon of stress" William James describes as the ability to choose one thought over another. The contemporary name given to this is mindfulness. A further articulation of it is what Hoffman describes as "the experience of experience itself". In writing about the slower quality of time in the Communist Poland of her childhood and contrasting it with the accelerated nature of time in twenty-first-century America, she refers to America's trading in of this very experience of experience. Her views raise interesting questions about the essence of how to experience life. In particular, they raise questions about the importance we give to our engagement with the sensory. This engagement involves the taking of time. It also involves interacting with the real — the sensorially-based — as opposed to the virtual. This may be as simple a choice as choosing to enter a park and to engage with the wealth that is found there.

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ABSTRACT

This essay, based on a piece of creative non-fiction set in Lisbon's Estrela Park and inspired by Emerson, explores questions of "slow time" and timelessness. It looks particularly at how these can contribute to mental well-being in an increasingly accelerated world in which virtual experiences are encroaching upon sensorially-based ones. It also looks at "slow time" as an activity related to the accessing and savouring of memories through the process of autobiographical creative writing.

KEYWORDS

Interconnectedness; memory; nature; well-being; writing

RESUMO

Este ensaio tem por base um texto de escrita criativa, inspirado por Emerson acerca do Jardim da Estrela, em Lisboa. Explora questões relacionadas com o "tempo lento" e estados de espírito "fora do tempo", focando possíveis contributos para o bem-estar mental, num mundo acelerado e em que as experiências virtuais estão a impregnar a realidade sensorial. O "tempo lento" é também examinado como uma atividade que permite o acesso e a fruição de memórias autobiográficas através do processo de escrita criativa.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Bem-estar; escrita; interconectividade; memória; natureza
